
Sunday 2nd May – Fifth Sunday of Easter
Readings: Acts 8:26-end & John 15:1-8

Acts 8:26-end

Philip and the Ethiopian

Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, ‘Go south to the road – the desert road – that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza.’ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian 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, and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. The Spirit told Philip, ‘Go to that chariot and stay near it.’

Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. ‘Do you understand what you are reading?’ Philip asked.

‘How can I,’ he said, ‘unless someone explains it to me?’ So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

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.

In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth.’

The eunuch asked Philip, ‘Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?’ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

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 baptised?’ And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptised him. 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. Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and travelled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

John 15:1-8

The vine and the branches

'I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit, he prunes so that it will be even more fruitful. You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

'I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples'.

Reflection

Whenever I read this section of the Acts of the Apostles, I am always struck by the intensity and speed with which everything happens. It must have been an amazing time to be a follower of Jesus and part of his fledgling church. Here in chapter eight, we have Philip first going to Samaria, then meeting the Ethiopian on the road, then finding himself in Azotus before proceeding to Caesarea... I feel exhausted just writing that sentence!

In our passage for this week, we read about Philip's encounter with an important Ethiopian who had been to Jerusalem to worship God, a reminder (if we needed one) that even at this time that faithful worshippers would come from across the known world to worship in Jerusalem. It was not unusual at this time for those who could read to do so out loud, and Philip overhears him reading the Book of Isaiah. I wonder if he often read the scriptures, whether he had read them on the way to Jerusalem, or had he been so inspired by his time there that he had acquired a new scripture to read? I have often returned from a Christian conference with a new Bible or book to read, full of good intentions.

The initial interaction between Philip and the Ethiopian is, I think, of key importance. The author doesn't record Philip sharing common pleasantries or trying to connect with the Ethiopian, "Oh, I've read that one, it's a good one!". No, in this account Philip asks, "Do you understand what you are reading?" to which the Ethiopian replies "How can I, unless someone explains it to me?" (vs. 30-31)

One of the things that I have noticed over the last few weeks as we have read and reflected on resurrection Bible passages are the times the risen Jesus is recorded as teaching and explaining his life, death and resurrection from scripture. How would the disciples know unless he explained it to them? And once they knew they were able to share that good news with others that they met, whether it was Peter in Jerusalem, Paul in Antioch or Philip here on the road with the Ethiopian.

Which brings us to our Gospel passage, "If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit" (v. 5) The disciples had been with Jesus during his earthly ministry for up to three years, he had appeared to them and taught them after his resurrection. It should not be a surprise to us that during this intense and exciting time they were rooted in him, obedient to his call and fruitful in their ministry.

But Jesus' words were not only for the disciples that were with him that day, but for all of us that would follow. As we spend time with him and put down roots into his word, we should also seek to understand by allowing him to speak to us, learning from Christian teachers, and discussing the word with one another so that we might be able to explain it to others. How are you remaining in Jesus? What can you do to grow in understanding? Why not join others from the church reading our Bible Plan together:

<https://bible.com/p/41838889/880bcf0f01fbb01ea6edb2b7c0370ea7>

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