

PHILIP – an early church hero

Acts 8:26-40 [MW21-02]

Sermon preached by Rev Wayne Thornton at Mangawhai and Wellsford, Sunday 17 January 2021

Philip ... the name means “lover of horses”

- usually called ‘Philip the Evangelist’ to distinguish him from ‘Philip the Apostle’ because he was not one of the disciples
- and he does not get a mention in our Calendar of Saints or a special day whereas Philip the Apostle, the disciple, does

Maybe that is because this Philip perhaps was just an ordinary person

- a Jew, but not one who lived in Palestine, a Greek speaking Jew like all good Jews are supposed to at least once he had most likely come to Jerusalem for one of the great religious festivals
- while there he heard the preaching about this “Jesus Christ” and became a follower
- Philip’s life was touched and changed by this experience he himself never saw or heard Jesus but the gospel message meant that he stayed on in Jerusalem
- so he knew firsthand what it was like not to know Jesus, to be preached to and to have your life turned around by, the Good News of Jesus Christ

So there is this ordinary person, Philip

- like hundreds of others joining a new “family”, the Jerusalem church followers of Jesus Christ
- we don’t even know where he comes from or anything about his own family we don’t know how old he was or what he did
- then something happens which reveals his character and abilities and sets this ordinary person on an extraordinary path

The thing which sparked it all off was the disagreement over distribution of food and money

- between the Jewish speaking and Greek speaking groups in the Jerusalem church the proposed solution was to select seven men of good reputation full of wisdom and the spirit to oversee this and help with the day to day tasks as “deacons”
- something about this fresh convert, Philip, must have made him stand out because he was one of the seven selected
- and all seven did a great job reconciling Christians from different backgrounds crossing boundaries, mediating, enabling the Good News to spread

The message sure spread, drawing attention to the message and the messengers

- which led to the arrest, trial and stoning of Stephen (also one of the seven) and was the beginning of the persecution of the followers of Jesus as “Christians”
- Philip, along with many, many others was forced to flee the city where they had first heard the Good News
- yet it was not the end, just the beginning as the gospel began to be preached “everywhere”!

With the whole of the known world at his doorstep

- for some reason Philip goes just next door ... to Samaria

This is unexpected and astounding

- for Samaritans and Jews saw each other as enemies they hated each other with a vengeance there was a colossal cultural and religious divide
- and Philip found himself in the place of the despised outsider

We can only surmise that he must have been responding to a call of the Spirit

- for despite the deep hostility that existed Philip willingly and eagerly preached the Good News to the Jews' ancient enemies
- and he was an overnight sensation, a runaway success! there were so many converts, so many amazing things happening that Peter and John came in person to check out the situation

We get a further insight into Philip's character in his relationship with Simon the Sorcerer

- this Simon gets more headlines in Acts than many of the hardworking Christians and has certainly had lots written about him and raised eyebrows throughout history
- for it seems that Simon is attracted to this new faith by the miracles and wonders and kept close to Philip because he wanted to be able to do these things himself for his own ends
- Simon's profession of Christianity raised suspicion at the very least he was unorthodox, provocative, selfish, morally suspect and those are just his good points
- you get the feeling Paul would have rebuked him and ditched him yet Philip allowed Simon to accompany him for some time
- in spite of all Simon's foibles and unorthodoxy Philip hung in there offering the hand of friendship and fellowship

So there is Philip trying to help a manipulative Simon on the path to life

- at the same time as the mission to Samaria is a raging success signs, wonders, whistles, bells ... it is just huge
- and Philip turns his back on it all and walks away

As we heard in the reading:

The Lord's angel said to Philip, "Go south along the desert road that leads from Jerusalem to Gaza." So Philip left.

Philip is obedient to God's call

- he is not led by psychology or sociology, marketing strategy, church growth principles he responds simply to God's call and goes out to the desert
- Philip leaves behind the excitement of a revival hundreds, maybe even thousands becoming followers of Jesus in order to meet just one person

And what a person this turns out to be

- the chief treasurer for Candace, the Queen of Ethiopia the Ethiopian equivalent of Grant Robertson!
- this Ethiopian dignitary was the equivalent of the Minister of Finance reporting directly to the Queen
- and God leads an unknown Greek speaking Jew to meet with this powerful official in the middle of nowhere
- yet as powerful as this Ethiopian official was he had a longing to know God, a need to belong to be part of the community of faith

Once more Philip has some barriers to cross

- for the official is a Gentile, a foreigner and a eunuch in the ancient Middle East rulers tended to rely on men who had been castrated to fill important posts reasoning that without families they would not have divided loyalties
- the Law of Moses stated that a person who had been castrated could not be part of the Covenant or even come into the assembly of God's people and was therefore excluded

But not by Philip

- Philip shows no resentment at leaving behind crowds to speak to just one person and far from being put off and only begrudgingly speaking to this Minister of Finance he runs up to the chariot and stays close to this man who is so different from him
- and Philip does something else significant too he notices what the man is doing
- Philip does not start out by giving a standard presentation of the Good News he does not hand the man a "Jesus Loves You" bumper sticker for his chariot and carry on
- rather he responds to what the Ethiopian is doing and is invited up beside him where he ... listens to what the man says

Revealingly, a recent survey in the United States of 'felt needs'

- showed that the number one felt need was not to be rich, nor to be famous not even to be loved
- the number one felt need was simply to be heard! To be listened too ...

Philip heard the Ethiopian Minister of Finance

- he drew near to him, listened to him and discovered that he and this rich powerful man did have something in common: they both sought to understand scripture and to know God
- Philip met the man where he was with his questions about the prophet Isaiah's words and its meaning for him and was able to explain how it referred to Jesus
- Phillip was able to explain how Jesus had a place for everyone in his kingdom from Greek speaking Jews to high ranking eunuchs to Ethiopian Queens
- in response the Ethiopian official is baptised and returns to his homeland a believer in spite of his power and influence, until meeting with Philip this official had felt cut off, excluded
- now he became a person who would bear great spiritual fruit and find real meaning and purpose in life

According to the ancient historian, Eusebius

- this Minister of Finance established a church in Ethiopia and the queen herself decided to follow Jesus Christ
- making Ethiopia the very first Christian nation

Acts says that the official never saw Philip again

- and that Philip carried on from there, telling the Good News of Jesus and that's about all we know
- in Acts 21:8 we are told that Paul stayed with the preacher Philip who is said to have had four daughters that prophesied
- a late tradition describes Philip as settling at Tralles in Asia Minor where he became the bishop of that church

Philip is a person who was willing to cross all sorts of cultural barriers and taboos

- in order to share the Good News of Jesus

the Christian faith he models is accepting, generous, embracing and graceful

- a challenge to the clearly defined, safe and protective kind of Christianity which seems so popular in many quarters

In fact I think Philip was an Anglican

- no, seriously, maybe he could be the Patron Saint of Anglicans!
- for while he is passionate about his faith
- he is at the same time willing to be fuzzy about the edges
- there is a gracefulness about him
- an ability to accept and not judge people
- even when they are people who others would not have touched with a spiritual bargepole

Philip reminds us that the faith we share is full of grace

- that we are called to be an accepting community
- non-judgemental, with open doors
- a little “fuzzy” round our edges, permeable, open for all who come in
- a reconciling community prepared to embrace those who are suspect for all sorts of reasons
- the unorthodox, the provocative, the liberal, the morally suspect
- the outsider, the excluded

That is for us as a church collectively

- as individuals, Philip invites us to do seven things:
- [Power Point Slide]
- I'll read them out for us ...

- listen for and be obedient to the call of God
- be prepared to leave something that is going well
- speak to strangers
- be gracious and accepting
- be okay with ‘fuzzy edges’
- listen to people
- meet people where they are

I invite you to take a moment and reflect on them

- then we'll conclude in prayer

Prayer [Power Point Slide]

Lord God we thank you for Philip

and the way he was able to share the message of Good News in Jesus.

*Help us to share this Good News in our day with grace and joy,
wherever you may lead us.*

Amen.