

Sermon Given by

Robin Church

At the 9am Service on 25<sup>th</sup> July 2010

### Acts 8:26-40 - "A divine appointment"

For the past three Sundays we have been working our way through Saint Luke's account of the development of the early Christian Church, and today we are looking at Acts, chapter 8, verses 26-40, which you can follow on pages 1,101-1,102 of your pew bibles. It seems to me that whereas the Old Testament speaks to us predominantly about the Acts of **God the Father**, & the Gospels are mainly devoted to those performed by Jesus, **God the Son**, so in many ways this book, and the letters that followed, might more appropriately have been called the **Acts of the Holy Spirit**. We see Him at work again in today's passage, as Philip, filled with the Spirit, responds to God's call, & has this strange encounter with the Ethiopian eunuch on the Jerusalem-Gaza road. I have always been intrigued by this man Philip, and I thought, by way of a challenge & encouragement to **us**, that it might be profitable to look at the different ways that God was able to use him to bring people to consider putting their trust in Him & commit their lives fully to His service. It raises the question, however, of what exactly is meant by Service. In fact what constitutes full time Christian Ministry?

I would like to look at Philip's calling to Christian Ministry under the headings:

#### his SUITABILITY. & his ADAPTABILITY

##### Firstly his SUITABILITY for selection for Christian Ministry

We don't know much about him other than he was one of the seven men that we heard about in our first reading, who were chosen to oversee the fair distribution of food to the widows of Grecian Jewish origin. It seemed that their needs were being overlooked in the burgeoning congregation of the early Jerusalem church. (Acts 8 v 1) Having Greek names, Philip, like the other men chosen, was probably a Grecian Jew himself, but what we do know for certain from Luke's account, is that the 7 men were all men known to be "full of the Spirit & of wisdom." These were their essential qualifications. There is, however, no indication from this that Philip had benefited from an education, though he clearly knew his Old Testament Scriptures. His knowledge of Greek & Hebrew would have been helpful & a degree in Theology, or the experience of a Cornhill Bible course would have come in handy. We know, however, from the Psalms, that it is the "***Fear of the Lord is the beginning of wisdom***". (Psalm 111 v 10). Sadly though, it would seem from this, that many that the World would regard as being wise, have, yet to begin! What impressed the Apostles most, however, was not only the wisdom of the 7 men they chose, but that they were men of integrity, "***known to be full of the Spirit***" The changes that had taken place in their lives were clearly apparent to all in the way they lived. (Acts 6 v 5). Growing up and working for many years, as I did, in East Africa, I could not help but notice similar changes in the Christians I met whose lives had been transformed by the work of the Holy Spirit. They were often nicknamed the "Abalokole", the ones that shone, and were much sort after by employers for their trustworthiness. Some of you may have read the article that appeared in the Times, written by Matthew Parris. I have mentioned it here in a previous sermon. Although, describing himself as a "confirmed atheist", he had to admit that, from his own observations in Malawi, he had become convinced that what Africa really needed was God! He had come to see for himself that "Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a

spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real.” I have left some more copies of his article on the table at the back if you would like to take one to read for yourself. These then were the basic qualifications for full time Christian service, and clearly Philip fitted the bill.

### **So what now of his adaptability?**

Philip’s first job was in administration, involving literally waiting at tables. I was thinking of giving this sermon a title from John Milton’s poem: “they also serve that only stand and wait!” As it turned out, this job didn’t last for long, for shortly afterwards, as a direct result of the persecution that followed the stoning of his colleague, Stephen, “***all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria.***” (Acts 8 v 1). Philip now finds himself with another job, that of “***proclaiming the Christ there.***” (Acts 8 v 5) Much to his own surprise, the Samaritans, though by nature hostile to the Jews & their religious views, gave him a fair hearing and “***paid close attention to what he said!***” (Acts 8 v 6). What’s more he finds that the Spirit has given him a gift not only of preaching, but of healing too! (v 7).

However, this phase of his Ministry was also to be curtailed & short lived, for God had in mind for him a completely different consignment? This was to be a **one-to-one involvement** with a man of influence, none other than the Chancellor of the Exchequer of Ethiopia, a Eunuch in the employ of Queen Candace, which we have read about in today’s passage. Having been involved in such a successful ministry in Samaria, it must have seemed very strange to Philip for God to **ask him to give it up!** and set out on the Gaza desert road with no idea what he was meant to be doing by going there. The reason for this extraordinary encounter soon became clear and the rest, as they say, is history. We should not leave this incident, however, without taking note of how Philip, guided of course by the Spirit, conducted the interview and subsequent action. He was first told to “***go to the chariot and stay near it.***” (Acts 8 v 29). After all “fools rush in where angels fear to tread.” He might so easily have blown it at that stage! He sensibly listened for his cue, (verse 30), and was probably somewhat astonished to find that this great man, clearly from another country & culture, not only spoke his own language, but was in fact reading from the Jewish Bible! Furthermore he had, at that very moment, reached none other than the very passage that had predicted the events of Good Friday! (Acts 8 v 32). What an opening for Philip! He was then able, “***starting with that very passage of Scripture,***” to answer the Eunuch’s questions, and tell him “***the good news about Jesus.***” (Acts 8 v 35).

But a word of caution here for us. We can so often rush in with the answer, when in fact the person we are talking to has raised no questions & feels no personal sense of need. We should listen for such openings if we are to be effective ministers of the Gospel. The cartoonist Shulz said just this through his character Peanuts. The caption on the billboard read: “CHRIST IS THE ANSWER! BUT WHAT WAS THE QUESTION?” We need also to remember that Philip was only a link in the chain that the Holy Spirit had been piecing together over the years. This Eunuch had been looking for answers, possibly for many years. He was obviously attracted to the Jewish religion, finding his own lacked reality. He had come to Jerusalem to worship, (Acts 8 v 27), & there he may well have met and talked with other Christians. He was clearly a seeker with deep questions that needed answers, & Philip, guided by the Spirit, was there for the moment of truth. The striker in football may be the one who eventually scores the goal, but only with the support of the largely unsung mid-field players. Then of course we need to remind ourselves, as we know only too well from recent events, that most football games are won or lost by goalkeepers!

Philip is then literally spirited away, (Acts 8 v 39), and next appears in Azotus, a town further north, and from there he continues an itinerant gospel ministry in the towns up the coast eventually reaching Caesarea, the headquarters of the local Roman administration. (Acts 8 v 40). It is here we lose track of him, until about twenty years later. What was he doing all those years? We don't really know, but from what Luke tells us later, in chapter 21 v 8, it seems that he had settled down to an urban life, got married and raised a God-fearing family, four of his daughters exercising gifts of prophecy. He clearly was given to hospitality and ran a large enough house to accommodate Paul & those who were travelling with him, possibly a sort of sea-side town bed & breakfast, but that is the last mention of him that we have in the Scriptural record.

In Ecclesiastes 9 v 10 we are given the advice: ***“Whatever your hand finds to do, do it with your might.”*** Philip certainly took this to heart, whether in administration, itinerant or one-to-one gospel ministry, or just in home-making and bringing up a family, who like him, loved & feared God, and wanted to use the gifts God had given them in His service.

A Woman once approached the evangelist Billy Graham, saying that she was the mother of 12 children, but she believed that God was calling her to full time Christian Ministry. He very sensibly said how pleased he was to hear this, and all the more so, that God had already given her a congregation! Christianity, like charity, should ideally begin in the home! In the case of Philip, all the activities he became involved with were in response to God's plan for his life, no one being more important than any other. They were performed, as the Spirit led him, as an integral part of his on-going full time Gospel Ministry.

**So where does that leave us today?** Clearly we are all called as individuals into an on-going relationship with God, but thereafter **we work as a team.** No one individual is more important when it comes to full time Christian Ministry. Paul makes this point in his letter to the Galatians when he says: ***“There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Jesus Christ.”*** (Gal 3 v 28) For starters, we should have a **healthy respect** for what God the Father **expects of us** in this relationship, and this surely is what is meant by the ***“fear of the Lord” (being) the beginning of wisdom.***

We then need to realise that we are at the beck and call of our Team Manager, the Holy Spirit. He may at times decide to put us up front & make us the strikers. He may want us mid-field most of our lives. He will need goalkeepers, whose job it is to stop the enemy from winning, and He may even rest us on the sidelines if need be. But for our part we need to be adaptable to His will, remembering that “They also serve who only stand and wait.” In our daily readings Joan & I have been following the life of King David, & yesterday's commentary ended with these words of commendation: David not only learned valuable spiritual lessons, he shared them. Through song writing he painted honest word pictures that made the ensuing eternal truths accessible to us. Might we emulate this aspect of David's, (& for that matter Philip's), life, by using our varied gifts to confirm God's work in our lives, bless others and bring honour to God?

---

Audio versions of the sermons can be freely downloaded from the All Saints Little Shelford website, <http://www.allsaintslittleshelford.org>. These are available in two formats, mp3 and wma.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)