

Philip and the Ethiopian Acts 8:26-40

Sunday, 4th July 2010

The Book of Acts tells the story of how the Church amazingly explodes out over about a 30 year period, from when there were 11 scared disciples locked away in a room in Jerusalem around 33AD, to around 62 AD when the Gospel had spread dramatically around the Mediterranean, into Asia – probably as far as India, and across the North of Africa.

As we have said before, it is part of the story, mainly covering the expansion into Europe, looking mainly at the lives of Peter and Paul.

In Acts 1:8, Jesus left His followers with a mission:

But you will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes on you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, and in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth."

So far we have looked at the first part of this, where the Church has been established in Jerusalem, it has spilled out into the surrounding countryside in Judea –

Crowds gathered also from the towns around Jerusalem (Acts 5:16)

And then, as Jon preached on last week, Stephen, this shining light of the Early Church was executed and following that, the Church left Jerusalem:

On that day a great persecution broke out against the church at Jerusalem, and all except the apostles were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria. (Ac. 8:1)

And so the Gospel reached the Samaritans too – and they received it, and there were many signs and wonders. And then Peter and John went down to check it out and saw that they really had responded to the Gospel. So they laid hands on them and prayed for them to receive the Holy Spirit, where a couple of years before, in their racism, they had been asking permission to call fire down from Heaven on the same villages!

When they had testified and proclaimed the word of the Lord, Peter and John returned to Jerusalem, preaching the gospel in many Samaritan villages. (Acts 8:25)

Then, straight after that, while this amazing expansion is still going on, we pick up today's passage which tells the story of the very first non-Jewish convert to Christianity.

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 Candace, 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.

I don't know how you picture this scene, I always thought of it as a man – a eunuch, so a servant, albeit an important servant, riding along in a little chariot, reading.

But let me try and paint the picture more accurately.

Ethiopia was not some little, primitive African country; it was a massive, wealthy, sophisticated empire that was a massive trading centre and covered many nations –

Axum, Cush, Sheba, and Geez: Today that would be South Egypt, Eritrea, Western Somalia, West & South Yemen, Ethiopia and Sudan.

And this man was no small servant. In Ethiopia, the king was believed to be a son of the sun god, and so was not required to do any work. Instead, his mother, the queen would rule on his behalf. And she would have had servants who acted on her behalf, as chancellors or prime ministers.

In 24BC someone of this rank was sent to negotiate peace terms with Rome after a Roman general - Petronius invaded. So this man would have carried the authority to negotiate between empires and superpowers.

So he would have been in his chariot, reading his scroll, but he would have probably travelled in a procession of different chariots with servants and with soldiers guarding him.

When I was very young, I remember seeing the queen on her way to open a new police station. People were lining the road watching to see her coming; then some police motorbikes went past; then some police cars with lights flashing; then a line of black limousines, and then there was a little hand

waving from one of them, and then more police cars and bikes; I think that that would be closer to the scene Philip found.

This man had travelled 1500 miles up to Jerusalem to worship – obviously he was a devout, searching man, and here he was reading a very expensive scroll of Isaiah, possibly because it prophesies about his nation.

The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

The normal attitude of the Jews at the time was to keep hold of the Blessing of God for themselves and to despise other nations; so when Philip ran up alongside the chariot and saw who was inside – a foreigner, from a different nation and a different race - black and Gentile, he could easily have reacted the same way as the prophet Jonah, who rebelled against what God was telling him to do – "Go to a Gentile city with My Message".

But Philip was different – he was a man who had been grabbed and changed by the New Covenant, who understood God's Heart for all nations – even better than some of the Apostles did by this point!

So he looked into the chariot, and what he saw was a man who was searching for God – and maybe he saw somewhere that the Holy Spirit was working.

So when he looked into the chariot, he didn't hesitate.

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.

The eunuch was reading this passage of Scripture:

Actually, out of almost any passages of Scripture he could have been reading, he was reading one of the clearest prophecies about Jesus' death, from Isaiah 53:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before the 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. Why shouldn't I be baptized?" And he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him.

There was enough clear repentance and understanding for this man to order his procession to stop, and then to go down into a pool or stream of water – maybe still wearing his rich clothes, and be baptised, and then come out the water praising God – in full sight of his servants and officials.

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.

So Philip was miraculously taken 20 miles north to Azotus, while this man carried on his way, taking with him the Kingdom of God and the Good News into another continent!

And it worked! This official went back to his home nation and the Gospel spread and took root, until around 300 years later, Ethiopia became the first Christian nation on Earth after a man called Frumentius of Tyre shared the Gospel with King Ezana.

Earlier on in Isaiah, God says, talking about Jesus – His "Servant":

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant

to restore the tribes of Jacob

and bring back those of Israel I have kept.

I will also make you a light for the Gentiles,

that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth." (Isaiah 49:6 NIV)

It has always been in God's Plan for His Kingdom and salvation to expand and it was prophesied that it was too small a thing only to bless and restore Israel; God's Glory couldn't be contained into just one nation.

And just as the Holy Spirit led Philip to this place, to meet this man, so that he would become a Christian and take the Gospel back with him, so God is at work preparing other people and nations for the Gospel.

Around 100 years ago God stirred a man called James Fraser to pray for a small nation of people called the Lisu, who lived in the mountains of south-western China and Burma. He prayed and tried to learn their language and came up with a way of writing it down – up until this point they did not have a written language. For 6 years he did this without seeing any fruit, but then, suddenly something changed.

What he found was that this completely unreached people group, with no written language, had been waiting for generations for **“a white brother with a book of the True God, written in the Lisu language.”**

Within a year, 60,000 Lisu had come to faith in Jesus!

There is an excellent book called “Eternity in their hearts” by Don Richardson (£5.40 on Amazon) which tells the stories of how God has prepared hundreds of cultures.

Over the centuries, God's plan hasn't changed and His heart hasn't changed. He is still at work preparing people for the Gospel – and around us in Birmingham, there are many nations – and God is at work in all of them.

I believe that God has put something in us as a church that means we are similar to Philip; we don't recoil from other cultures – we run after them!

And as we chase after them, we are putting ourselves where God is working, and I believe that we will meet people and cultures that God has prepared.

Someone said about the Ethiopian:

As he came along in his chariot, reading from a roll of the prophecy of Isaiah, someone has said that he was like a man at sunrise, tilting his manuscript in

such a manner as to catch the first rays of the rising sun of Christianity (*James Burton Coffman Bible Study Library*)

God will lead us to friends and neighbours and cultures that are doing similar – searching, having dreams, having some pieces of the jigsaw puzzle, and the Holy Spirit will guide us – just as He guided Philip.