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## Sermon

6<sup>th</sup> May, 2012

### **Go, Pay attention and Obey**

**Acts 8:26-40**

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After Jesus' ascension, the Holy Spirit was poured out on the first believers and the church started to grow rapidly. You will remember that one of the problems they had to deal with was fair distribution of food to their widows. To manage this, seven men were appointed to supervise the food. One of them was Stephen and another was Philip.

These two were not limited to the foodbank. Stephen, of course, developed into a great apologist (debater or defender) of Christianity, until finally he was killed by those who could not stand his arguments. Following this a general persecution of Christians broke out in Jerusalem. It was about 34-35AD. The young Church was scattered and had to flee. Philip went to Samaria. He too proved to be quite a preacher and successfully presented the gospel to the Samaritans - leading them to Christ with many healing miracles and deliverances.

Now to go to the Samaritans was not a normal action. The Jews hated the Samaritans because they were a mixture of peoples brought in to replace the exiled ten tribes. Worse still they had mixed Judaism with other beliefs. That is why Jesus' example of the Good Samaritan was so shocking to them and his readiness to travel through Samaria when most would travel around the country to avoid the people.

So Philip had great success preaching to the Samaritans and after the initial impact the move spread out from the first city to surrounding villages.<sup>1</sup>

Don't think that being an administrator means God can't use you to reach people. It is easy to think, "I am not like Billy (Graham), Louis (Palau), Barbara (Jones), Brenda (Taylor) or whoever." But actually God can use any one of us if we will allow him to. You might be sweeping leaves outside and someone stops to ask about the church - is there an opportunity there? You might be on kitchen duty for *mainly music* - there are mums to talk to during and afterwards. Stephen and Philip were chosen to ensure fair distribution of food - but ended up as miracle working preachers!

Well, Philip is in Samaria, he has led many to Christ, healed many and delivered many from evil oppression. It's all going wonderfully and he is told to leave! Leave! - now? Can't you imagine how he would like to

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<sup>1</sup> Acts 8:25

have stayed and continued this fruitful work? But God sent a message to him telling him to go the road from Jerusalem south to Gaza.

He doesn't say why. We like to know why we are to do things don't we. But Philip is just told to travel on that particular road. No reason – go!

And we are told it was the desert road. The original actually translates, "The angel of the Lord said to Philip, 'Arise, and go on toward the south, on the way down from Jerusalem to Gaza,' -- this is desert."<sup>2</sup>

"This is desert." Just an observation – not essential – so why was it said? It was not the best place to go. It was not pleasant; there would not be many people there. We know that Luke who wrote Acts definitely stayed with Philip about 25 years later. He records the visit in Acts 21. Maybe we are hearing Philip's own words to Luke reflecting on the toughness of the route and the assignment.

But he went! Would we? If God said to you, "Go south and travel across the central plateau." Or, "Go up north towards Kaitaia." Would you go ... or would make an excuse not to go? "I probably didn't hear right; just my imagination; if he wants me to he'll tell me again. Come on, Lord, it's all going so well here; I can't leave now. I don't want to go into the desert."

At the beginning of Lent, I asked if you would consider using it as a time to seek the Lord for his plans for us as a fellowship. With the building completed, what is his next main focus for us. There are many plans and projects we could do but we want his best for us not just our bright ideas. At the March Top Priority meeting we prayed together about that and spent some time just waiting on the Lord to see what we thought he was saying.

My thoughts went like this:

"What do you want us to do?"

"You already know."

"Sorry, I may know, but I don't know what I know."

When we shared impressions, Jon Henderson said he had been thinking, "I am the Way, the truth and the Life." And I suddenly realized that was the continuation of mine. In John 14, Jesus says he is leaving but they will follow him. Thomas asks where to. Jesus says you know. Thomas says I don't where or the way to get there. And Jesus says, "I am the Way, the Truth and the Life."

Where shall we go? Stay in me, I am the Way. Or from today's gospel reading, "I am the vine; you are the branches. If a man remains in me and I in him, he will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing."<sup>3</sup>

In addition to that, Lynelle had the impression, "Sail to the horizon; trust me to lead you."

I have held those words these last two months. We studied the John 14 & 15 passages in Holy Week. I think more than ever that he is saying, Go as far as you can see. Do what you can and know to do and I will meet you in the midst of it. The important thing is to be in me – in the way.

So Philip goes, surely wondering why and what he is to do. On the way, he meets a chariot and he hears the occupant reading from Isaiah. In those times, everyone always read aloud – silent reading had not developed. Now this man was a very important official from Ethiopia. We would call him the Minister of Finance, but that doesn't give the feel of the personal power he would have in an absolute monarchy. He served Candace – that is a title not a name. She was the Queen Mother. In that country, the King was deemed to be too holy to concern himself with ruling, so she was the true ruler of the nation. This was her treasurer or steward. He is described as a eunuch- all palace servants were emasculated in those cultures. He has come to Jerusalem because he either a Jew or a God fearer seeking to know God.

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<sup>2</sup> Acts 8:26 (Own translation)

<sup>3</sup> John 15:5

Philip senses the Holy Spirit tell him to draw alongside the chariot. He does and then makes the connection by asking if the official understood what he is reading. He has the humility to admit he doesn't and invites Philip to join him and explain the passage.

It is of course part of the Suffering Servant theme in Isaiah which had puzzled everyone. In particular, it is from chapter 53 ("Surely he took our infirmities and carried our sorrows"). There Philip had an advantage because Jesus had related the passage to himself.<sup>4</sup> So beginning with the man's question, Philip tells him about Jesus and leads him to salvation.

If we are going to be used by God, we need to look for the prompts and act on them. Philip obeyed the prompting to approach the chariot. But he needed to take the initiative to ask if the man understood what he was reading.

When Helen and I were away, we stayed two nights at a hotel. We got talking to the duty manager. Then there was a security issue with our room. That night, Helen thought how unusual that was. She then wondered if God was using this event for a reason. She ended up with the idea that God wanted her to ask the Duty Manager if she knew God had a call on her life. When Helen opened her Bible next morning, it was a passage about God calling someone before they were born. So she took courage as we checked out and told this to the manager. She was (of course) amazed but also excited. She asked if she could photocopy the page of the Bible and said she would read it after work. It is just a step on the way but I think Helen grasped the prompting she was given and acted on it. What happens next is up to God.

In the case of Philip and the Ethiopian, what happened next was that the man became a Christian and was baptised immediately, then their courses parted - job done! The Ethiopian goes on his way rejoicing while Philip is mysteriously whisked off to the coast by the Spirit of God. From there he travels up the coast, preaching as he goes and apparently settles in Caesarea.

As you go, the Spirit will open opportunities. As we go forward together in the Way, as we go forward in Christ walking with him, obeying him, the Holy Spirit will open opportunities for us.

Do you remember the "Use me" prayer from two years ago? I encouraged you simply to pray "Use me" in the morning and see what happened. A number of you reported God-incidents started to happen. Perhaps we need to turn our hands to do whatever is at hand, pray "use me" and see what happens.

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<sup>4</sup> Lk 22:37