

SERMON: 29 APRIL 2018 – Rev Alistair Cowper

“DANCING TO THE BEAT OF GOD’S HEART, WALKING IN STEP WITH THE SPIRIT” (Acts 8:26-40)

“Preaching is inviting people into the mystery of what the preacher is in the process of discovering” - Sam Wells.

Context

The early church is scattered abroad due to a great wave of persecution. This story comes just before Saul’s conversion. But the persecution results in the Good News about Jesus (8:4) being preached. Philip performs miracles, casts out evil spirits, heals the lame and paralysed and many people were baptised as a result of his message (this is fruitfulness) and those baptised then receive the Holy Spirit through the laying on of hands by the apostles who come from Jerusalem. The story begins with Philip hearing the voice of an angel of the Lord, and in it we see a prime example of what it means for a believer to walk in step with the Spirit of God, something God has enabled all of us to do. Philip was dancing to the beat of God’s heart He was learning to walk in step with the Spirit of God.

1] There is the call to minister in the single word, “Go”. In this word which Philip hears, and there is further Spiritual direction/guidance in the words “go over and walk along beside”. Philip’s response is not just to go but we’re told he ran over and heard the man reading.

2] There is the missional opportunity with someone who is seeking the truth. Taking the initiative, making the most of the opportunity he’s given, Philip engages the eunuch with a question, “do you understand?”

3] There is the question of availability. Philip is invited to “come up and sit with (the eunuch)” and he responds with a willingness to teach and spend time with, meeting this person where he was, (beginning with the same scripture the eunuch was reading), then goes beyond in (“us(ing) many other passages”).

Two comments on that then, firstly we can engage people where they are, with the questions they are asking, and then being prepared to take matters further when appropriate.

Secondly, God is more interested in our availability than our ability. He tends not to call only the equipped but equips those he calls. Everyone gets to play a part in God’s mission of love in the world. It’s the willingness to play that matters. And, as Mike Pilavachi puts it, to play nicely and share the toys.

Philip doesn't know it all but he's one step ahead - evangelism/the Gospel has been defined as 'one poor beggar showing another where to get bread'.

4] There is the question of character. The Bible tells us, in Acts 6, that Philip was one of the 7 chosen to wait on tables, to serve the early church, because he was well respected, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom. He had a reputation of being of good character, which no doubt had been tried and tested throughout the years preceding this call to ministry. Reputations matter. They can help to create the conditions in which effective ministry and mission can take place.

5] The end of the story sees the eunuch "(going) down into the water" and "(coming) up rejoicing"

Philip must have explained baptism as a sign and mark of change in the eunuch's life.

6] Lastly, there is the question of Philip being "caught away" by the Spirit, and finding himself in Azotus, where he preached Good News.

Going deeper

In the Bible, eunuchs are described as servants to the Queen or the King's harem. (Esther 2:14-15; 4:4-5; 2 Kings 9:32). Due to the nature of the job they were castrated. The Eunuch in this encounter, identifies with the passage in Isaiah known as one of the suffering servant passages, which Philip "implicitly identifies with the crucified and risen Jesus" (BD). We can surmise that the eunuch must have been extremely wealthy or at least have access to wealth, perhaps in his role as Queen's treasurer, to have obtained a copy of the scroll of Isaiah. There were very few hand written copies in those days. As a eunuch he would have been scorned and stigmatised in society. Someone who, despite being drawn to the Jewish faith, would not have been consider able to become a convert to Judaism. Because he would have been castrated and therefore because he was not whole, he wouldn't be considered to be holy enough, since holiness was believed to be related to wholeness.

God loves everyone, including those on the margins of society. His grace extends to all. The Bible is clear that Christ Jesus died for all, and has made a way for everyone to discover love, life and light.

But somehow, it can be all too easy for the guardians of religion to make it too difficult for outsiders to come near. Somehow they are not holy enough, or good enough, or sorted enough. And so they can be left outside, on the margins.

Perhaps that's why Jesus is often to be found out there, on the margins of society, with the lost, the last and the least.

Sam Wells, who I quoted at the beginning, leads a life transforming church in central London, and their mission statement is At the Heart, On the Edge.

At the heart, not just because they find themselves in the heart of the city but because, at the heart of everything is God's decision never to be, except to be, with us, in Christ. What this then means for them, and for us too, is practising and being known for, compassion, understanding and love. Not walking away from people when life or the church or health or those close to them have let them down. Church at the heart.

And on the edge. On the edge, not just because they are on the edge of Trafalgar Square, but because God's heart is on the edge of human society, with those who have been excluded, or rejected or ignored. Its about saying , we want to be where God is, and if God is on the edge, then that's where we're going to be, walking alongside the downtrodden or the hurting, so that they can find the courage, the voice and the opportunity, to speak for themselves.

Dancing to the beat of God's heart - learning to walk in step with the Spirit of God is about being church at the heart of God and being prepared to go to the margins of society to preach the good news that we are in the process of discovering for ourselves. As another theologian has put it, words which were shared at my induction service, our vocation, as followers of Christ, is to regard everyone as a future citizen of God's kingdom. We bring them into God's kingdom by loving them as Jesus does. Only then will the chains fall that still bind them. Philip did this in this scripture account. May we have similar testimonies of Christ's ministry here in Kirknewton and East Calder.

In the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.