

LORDSBRIDGE TEAM OF CHURCHES



The Church's prayer for Sunday 2nd May

Risen Christ,
your wounds declare your love for the world
and the wonder of your risen life:
give us compassion and courage
to risk ourselves for those we serve,
to the glory of God the Father.

Bible readings and reflection for Sunday 2nd May

A reading from the book of Acts 8:26-40

Philip and the Ethiopian

²⁶ Now an angel of the Lord said to Philip, "Go south to the road—the desert road—that goes down from Jerusalem to Gaza." ²⁷ So he started out, and on his way he met an Ethiopian^[a] eunuch, an important official in charge of all the treasury of the Kandake (which means "queen of the Ethiopians"). This man had gone to Jerusalem to worship, ²⁸ and on his way home was sitting in his chariot reading the Book of Isaiah the prophet. ²⁹ The Spirit told Philip, "Go to that chariot and stay near it."

³⁰ Then Philip ran up to the chariot and heard the man reading Isaiah the prophet. "Do you understand what you are reading?" Philip asked.

³¹ "How can I," he said, "unless someone explains it to me?" So he invited Philip to come up and sit with him.

³² This is the passage of Scripture the eunuch was reading:

"He was led like a sheep to the slaughter,
and as a lamb before its shearer is silent,
so he did not open his mouth.

³³ In his humiliation he was deprived of justice.

Who can speak of his descendants?

For his life was taken from the earth."^[b]

³⁴ The eunuch asked Philip, "Tell me, please, who is the prophet talking about, himself or someone else?" ³⁵ Then Philip began with that very passage of Scripture and told him the good news about Jesus.

³⁶ As they traveled along the road, they came to some water and the eunuch said, "Look, here is water. What can stand in the way of my being baptized?" ^[37] ^[a] ³⁸ And

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he gave orders to stop the chariot. Then both Philip and the eunuch went down into the water and Philip baptized him. ³⁹ 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. ⁴⁰ Philip, however, appeared at Azotus and traveled about, preaching the gospel in all the towns until he reached Caesarea.

A Gospel reading from the Gospel of John, Chapter 15 verses 1-8

The Vine and the Branches

15 "I am the true vine, and my Father is the gardener. ² He cuts off every branch in me that bears no fruit, while every branch that does bear fruit he prunes^ἄ so that it will be even more fruitful. ³ You are already clean because of the word I have spoken to you. ⁴ Remain in me, as I also remain in you. No branch can bear fruit by itself; it must remain in the vine. Neither can you bear fruit unless you remain in me.

⁵ "I am the vine; you are the branches. If you remain in me and I in you, you will bear much fruit; apart from me you can do nothing. ⁶ If you do not remain in me, you are like a branch that is thrown away and withers; such branches are picked up, thrown into the fire and burned. ⁷ If you remain in me and my words remain in you, ask whatever you wish, and it will be done for you. ⁸ This is to my Father's glory, that you bear much fruit, showing yourselves to be my disciples.

A reflection from Sue Nelms, member of the Lordsbridge Team Chapter

Do you ever find yourself taking an instant liking or dislike to someone? I have to confess that I think that I really rather like Philip in today's reading from Acts. He is a bit of a super-hero, doing amazing things yet coming across somehow as being humble, doing exactly what he needs to do without a fuss. He is also one of the few people in the Bible who suddenly makes a pretty inexplicable exit which is apparently nothing out of the ordinary for the people around him.

The Philip in today's reading is Philip the Evangelist, not Philip the apostle. He is part of the early Church and becomes one of what was known as the seven, a group of men chosen by the apostles to serve the community's physical needs so that the apostles themselves could focus on prayer and serving the word.

The overwhelming impression we get of Philip is obedience; whatever he is told to do, he does wholeheartedly, so when an angel tells him to go to the wilderness road

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that runs south from Jerusalem to Gaza, he goes. Now at the time there was more than one road between Jerusalem and Gaza and the others were in better condition than the one that went through the desert so they had the bulk of the traffic, but Philip does not question the angel. He simply waits for guidance as to what to do next.

He sees an Ethiopian Eunuch, the government official in charge of the treasury of the queen of the Ethiopians so a really important man, travelling home along the south road in his carriage after visiting Jerusalem.

He was not from the Ethiopia that we would think of today. At that time, Ethiopia was made up of what we would think of as a mixture of southern Egypt and northern Sudan, rather than being where Ethiopia is today. It was also known as Kush – and if you remember the wife of Moses came from Kush, so the two nations were familiar to each other.

Although he was called Ethiopian, the official is possibly a Jewish believer because he had been to Jerusalem, the place where Jews were supposed to worship God, in order to visit the temple and worship. It is not clear just how far he would have been allowed to go in the temple because his physical condition would have made him unclean under the law according to Deuteronomy chapter 23 verse 1 and therefore unable to enter any of the areas considered holy than the general areas. On the other hand in Isaiah chapter 56, God welcomes both foreigners and eunuchs.

Whatever reception he had received, as he returns home in his chariot, he is reading chapter 53 of Isaiah, about the sacrificial lamb, but struggling to understand it. Was it referring to the prophet himself, Isaiah, or could it have been referring to the man Jesus, who had recently been crucified in Jerusalem, about whom there were reports that he had risen from the dead and proved his place as Messiah?

At this moment you get one of the bizarre super-hero images from this story; that of Philip running alongside the carriage calmly chatting to the official and asking him if he understands what he is reading and then being invited to join him and explain it to him.

It turns out that the Eunuch is also a man of action. Once Philip had explained things to him he understood and became a Christian believer. And having accepted Philip's authority, on seeing some water he asks Philip to baptize him. His choice of words "What is to prevent me from being baptized?" may answer the question we had before about how much access the official got to the Temple in Jerusalem – did something or someone there prevent him from worshipping his God properly?

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After the baptism you get the second of this story's bizarre super-hero images; that of Philip being transported to somewhere completely different, Azotus, some 30 miles away, while the Eunuch goes on his way rejoicing, apparently oblivious to Philip's absence or accepting of it.

Philip, on the other hand, having landed, and presumably gathered his breath in Azotus, then starts doing what he does best, sharing the word of God with everyone. Philip's input into the story more or less ends at this point, although we do learn later that he makes his way slowly up the coast to Caesarea, talking to people all of the way, settles there and has four daughters who apparently continue his work of evangelisation. The final reference to him in the book is in chapter 21 when he and his family are visited by Paul and his followers.

Back tracking for a moment, the Ethiopian official's response to Philip's question "Do you understand what you are reading?" was "How can I unless someone guides me?" and that leads us into today's gospel reading looking at Jesus as the true vine, and God as the gardener.

A vine needs guiding, just as believers do. I don't know if you have ever grown a vine, but they need a lot of work in order to be productive. If you don't put in the work, they go wild and rampage all over the place, serving no real purpose and generally being a nuisance.

We can be a bit like that. We need people to teach and explain the gospel to us. We need the Holy Spirit to help us to teach and explain the gospel to other people. If you look back at Philip's story, he responded when the Holy Spirit told him to go over to the chariot and join the Ethiopian official in his study of the book of Isaiah.

Again, after he had baptised the Ethiopian official, the Holy Spirit took Philip from the water and placed him in Azotus, a town on the coast some 30 miles away, where he began speaking to the people there. Philip accepts and is comfortable with the Holy Spirit in his life.

Philip has faith in God. He puts his life into God's hands, is obedient to God's command and bears fruit. By doing this, he glorifies God and I can really imagine God taking joy in Philip and the way he lives his life.

This is the challenge for us.

Are we prepared to abide in God because apart from him we can do nothing and end up withering?

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Are we prepared to abide in him, accept his pruning, training and nurturing, bearing fruit as a result?

I pray this morning that we will abide in Him and that we will each be able to become like Philip, connecting with the people we meet, wherever we meet them and answering that question "How can I unless someone guides me?".

Amen