

What an amazing story - Philip is told to go somewhere by an angel, then he's nudged by the Holy Spirit to evangelise to a complete stranger - who is converted, baptised and then the Spirit literally spirits Philip away!

Where do I start?

Firstly who was Philip?

He is often referred to as Philip the Evangelist to distinguish him from Philip the Apostle. He was one of 7 chosen deacons appointed to care for the Christian community in Jerusalem. By the time we meet him in this passage he has been preaching and performing miracles in Samaria where he went after the martyrdom of Stephen around AD36.

An angel of the Lord appears to him and tells him to drop everything, leave his thriving ministry and go into the wilderness and travel on the desert road between Jerusalem and Gaza. He wasn't told exactly where to go or why he was to go, but with faith Philip went obediently.

Then when Philip arrived in the middle of nowhere the Holy Spirit told him to run alongside a carriage, it didn't tell him what to do when he caught up with it, it was only when he came in earshot of the carriage that he would have heard the Ethiopian reading the passage from Isaiah and it would have started to make sense!

Now secondly what do we know about this Ethiopian?

He was an educated, powerful man, the chief treasurer of a wealthy kingdom and he was a eunuch.

Eunuchs were often castrated slaves - created to serve in high ranking positions of authority in the royal courts where they would be above suspicion of any sexual intrigue or open to blackmail.

Why had he gone to Jerusalem to worship? The impression is that he was perhaps a Jewish convert seeking God and had come to Jerusalem for one of the annual festivals when Jews were encouraged to worship at the temple and offer sacrifices. It would have been a very long, dangerous and expensive journey to reach Jerusalem from his homeland, so it was a very intentional act on his part to travel there. He would probably however have been sorely disappointed to discover when he got there that Jewish law excluded him, as a eunuch and as a foreigner (two things that he could not change), from entering the temple's inner courts.

Despite this set back he had purchased a scroll either of the whole Jewish bible (our Old Testament) or just the book of Isaiah and was reading it aloud on his way back home.

Now let's switch our attention back to Philip jogging alongside the carriage. As Philip arrives he hears him reading one of the most explicit texts prophesying the death, burial and resurrection of Christ. I am sure that now Philip knew exactly why he was there!

Several times in Luke's writings we are reminded that reading and understanding scripture are not the same thing. Philip opened the conversation with a question – do you know what you are reading? The eunuch freely admits his need to have the text explained – demonstrating a teachable and seeking spirit - wanting to know who the suffering servant mentioned in the text was, who like him - had no descendants.

Jesus too - often used the technique of questions to open discussions, illustrating or reminding us that sharing the Gospel should be a dialogue not a monologue – a shared experience not a lecture.

Philip shares the good news about Jesus, the righteous sufferer, crucified and risen again who won victory over sin and death and that now repentance and forgiveness of sins was available to all in his name. He got straight to the point – Jesus.

The eunuch is so taken that he demands to be baptised as soon as they see a stretch of water.

The passage ends with Philip being miraculously transported over 30 miles away to a seacoast town where he continues his successful ministry. The eunuch however continued on his long journey home rejoicing. I want to know if he noticed Philip's sudden disappearance and how it happened, but Luke doesn't share this with us! So I just have to let that go!

What it did mean however is that the eunuch could not thank or reward Philip – the man - for the conversion and baptism and his focus instead was totally and entirely on his newly found faith.

Tradition has it that this eunuch was the father of Christianity in his nation – so although he had no biological descendents he did in fact leave a huge legacy. We never know when we are sharing the good news with someone about the impact that it might have on them, others, communities, even nations.

So what can we take away from this unusual account?

First – obedience – demonstrated by Philip. He did not doubt or question God, he simply did what he was told and saw what God wanted him to do. He was open to listen and then responded. It takes faith to do this. We need to trust in the promptings of the Holy Spirit even if we don't understand where they may lead - as obedience doesn't have to make sense!

Second – alertness – again demonstrated by Philip. Sometimes we get those inner promptings – it might be that a name of someone comes to mind out of the blue. Don't ignore it – phone them, whats app them, send them a card. You often find that there is a reason why contact from you is just what they need at that particular time in their life.

And third – having a teachable and seeking approach – as demonstrated by the eunuch. Just reading the Bible isn't enough - we need to truly understand and seek God. Others can help us in this and in turn we can help others. God leads the way.

And finally as we see from this story - just one convert – one conversation - can lead to massive things.

Dear Lord, I pray that we will all be alert and obedient to the promptings of your spirit – that we may continue to seek you with a teachable heart and look for every opportunity to share your good news with others. Amen.