

# A Message from Godfrey

Fifth Sunday of Easter Acts 8v 26-40

As we have moved through the Easter season we have seen how the post Resurrection church moved away from the immediate followers of Jesus and eventually became the church that we know today. There are many scholars who contend that Ethiopia became the first Christian nation and that influence is very real in Ethiopia today.

According to traditional sources, paganism as well as Judaism was practiced side by side in Ethiopia and that openness to all beliefs was probably one of the reasons why Islam became so readily accepted at a later stage long after the introduction of Christianity. Both were the result of contact with Middle Eastern countries through commercial and other channels. Earlier in Acts we hear that Philip proclaimed the gospel in Samaria and that many people believed and were baptized. After that Peter and John came to Samaria and prayed for the people to receive the Holy Spirit and when their ministry in Samaria was finished, Peter and John went back to Jerusalem.

Apparently, Philip stayed to minister to the new converts in Samaria. Then in today's reading from Acts we hear how God called Philip to another great task. An angel of the Lord directed Philip to travel south on the road from Jerusalem to Gaza. Of course Philip first had to go from Samaria to Jerusalem then on to Gaza. Luke notes that the road from Jerusalem to Gaza was a desert road but even so the evangelist Philip was quick to respond to God's call. After all, desert experiences are quite challenging, as Jesus himself could have recalled to his Disciples.

While he was traveling on the road to Gaza he came across an Ethiopian eunuch who had been to Jerusalem to worship. He was returning to his home and had a long journey ahead of him. The Ethiopian was sitting in his chariot and reading the prophet Isaiah, as one does!

Then the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot." Philip then ran to the chariot. As he ran up Philip heard the Ethiopian reading and asked him,

"Do you understand what you are reading?" The Ethiopian answered, "Well, how could I, unless someone guides me?" Then the Ethiopian invited Philip to sit with him.

The encounter with the Ethiopian gave Phillip an opportunity to witness. Philip seized the opportunity. The Ethiopian was reading the section from [Isaiah 53:7-8](#) concerning the suffering servant. He wondered if the prophet was speaking about himself or someone else. The passage was a prophecy about Jesus. So this was Philip's opportunity to preach about Jesus to him.

While recording this story Luke indicates what, from his perspective, one has to do to become a Christian.

When they came to some water, the Ethiopian asked, "What prevents me from being baptized?" "And Philip said, "If you believe with all your heart, you may." And he answered and said, "I believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God." The eunuch stopped the chariot and Philip baptized him in the water. Through his faith in Christ the Ethiopian became a Christian.

Philip, the evangelist, had just come from Samaria where the Spirit was mightily outpoured. No doubt he expected the Spirit to manifest his presence in this situation as well. He was not disappointed. We, too, can expect the Spirit to be powerfully present when we proclaim Christ as individuals and as a congregation.

When Philip and the Ethiopian came up out of the water, "The Spirit of the Lord snatched Philip away." The Ethiopian did not see him anymore. Philip found himself at Azotus, which was twenty miles north of Gaza. Quite how he got there, we are not told!

From Azotus Philip travelled north to Caesarea. As he travelled he kept preaching the gospel to all the cities until he came to Caesarea. We find him in Caesarea twenty years later. He is known by Luke ([Acts 21:8](#)) as "Philip the evangelist". The Ethiopian went away from the experience "rejoicing." Luke does not say anything about receiving the Spirit but joy is a part of the work that the Spirit performs. When the disciples ([Acts 13:52](#)) saw spiritual results they often had an accompanying joy. It is Paul, however, who writes about joy as a fruit of the Spirit.

The ministry of Philip brought about the expansion of the church. Jesus said that empowered disciples would be witnesses in Samaria and to the uttermost part of the globe. Philip ministered in Samaria and to the Ethiopian who, in turn, no doubt witnessed at home in Ethiopia. The Ethiopian eunuch was a Gentile secular official from a foreign land who took Jesus home with him. He was an African and a high government official. This was new ground for the Church and his conversion was the beginning of missionary outreach in the continent of Africa, where the Church is growing faster than in any other continent.

Rejoicing and joy. These were the reactions of the early church to new members and the influence of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

We Anglicans sometimes find rejoicing and joy difficult. Someone once said to me that,

"The trouble with you Anglicans is that when you go to church you look as though you are going to the dentist and when you come out, you look as though you have just been!" Perhaps it is not Anglican to show our emotions. I think we find it difficult to laugh in church or perhaps, as a well-known Irish comedian would say, "It's the way we tell them!" Perhaps we should think more about rejoicing and joy.

The early Church rejoiced and was joyful. As I walk around Cobham and Stoke d'Abernon I find a mixture of rejoicing and joy combined with pre-occupation with the cares of the world and a complete distraction and trepidation about the future. We see the joy of the Ethiopian as his eyes were opened to the joys of another culture and religion as was experienced by my former pupils. Perhaps we need to think about that as well.

On Thursday we have the chance to decide who will give our society the opportunity to rejoice and be joyful. I wonder if that will happen or will we be left in the same situation that existed in the days of the early Church where there was political tension and disease.

But will we respond to the challenge as the Early Church did and give those with whom, we as Christians come into contact, the help and support that they need as their situation becomes sometimes more difficult.

In order to do this we need to have a base from which to deliver the type of care and support we as Christians here in Stoke D'Abernon may well be called upon to provide as we move further out into the community. Yes, I am talking about my letter to you appealing for support for our Gift Day on the 24<sup>th</sup> May, the feast of Pentecost. My prayer is that like the Ethiopian eunuch our eyes and hearts will be opened by the challenge of the revelation of God as he experienced as he spoke with Philip and that we will respond with all the generosity we can manage.

Amen.